

Divorce or separation of parents: the impact on children and adolescents

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the effect that divorce or separation of parents might have on children and young people, and offers practical advice on how to ease this.

Introduction

Nearly half of all children in the UK will see their parents divorce. In 2001, 147 000 children under 16 saw their parents divorce, and just under a quarter of these children were under the age of 5 (Office for National Statistics, Census 2001).

When parents no longer love each other and decide to live apart, a child can feel as if their world has been turned upside down. The level of upset the child feels can vary depending on how their parents separated, the age of the child, how much they understand, and the support they get from family and friends.

How are children affected?

A child may feel:

- a sense of loss – separation from a parent can mean you lose not only your home, but your whole way of life
- different, with an unfamiliar family
- worried about being left alone – if one parent can go, perhaps the other will
- angry at one or both parents for the split-up.
- responsible for having caused the split-up, guilty
- rejected and insecure
- torn between two parents.

Most children long to get back to normal, and for their parents to be together again. Even if the marriage or partnership has been very tense or violent, children may still have mixed feelings about the separation.

It is important not to pull your child into the conflict. These tips may be useful:

- Don't ask your child to take sides: 'Who would you like to live with, darling?'
- Don't ask the your child what the other parent is doing.

- Don't use your child as a weapon to get back at your ex-partner.
- Don't criticise your ex-partner.
- Don't expect your child to take on the role of your ex-partner.

Whatever has gone wrong in the relationship, both parents still have a very important part to play in their child's life.

Emotional and behavioural problems

Emotional and behavioural problems in children are more common when their parents are fighting or splitting up. This can make a child very insecure. 'Babyish' behaviour (e.g. bedwetting, 'clinginess', nightmares, worries or disobedience) may be caused by the separation. This behaviour often happens before or after visits to the parent who is living apart from the family. Teenagers may show their distress by misbehaving or withdrawing into themselves. They may find it difficult to concentrate at school.

Where can I get help?

Parents whose marriage is splitting up can help their children. They should:

- make sure that the children know they still have two parents who love them, and will continue to care for them
- protect their children from adult worries and responsibilities
- make it clear that the responsibility for what is happening is the parents' and not the childrens'.

These things will help your child:

- Be open and talk. Your child not only needs to know what is going on, but needs to feel that it's OK to ask questions.

Sources of further information

- The Children's Society produces a series of leaflets for children and parents. See *Focus on families: Divorce and Its Effects on Children* (1988). London: The Children's Society. Tel. 0845 300 1128; e-mail info@childrenssociety.org.uk; www.the-childrens-society.org.uk.
- Citizens Advice Bureaux. Your local branch is listed in the telephone directory. www.nacab.org.uk.
- National Family Mediation is an organisation specifically set up to help families who are separating. It has a useful booklist, which includes books for children of different ages. Alexander House, Telephone Avenue, Bristol BS1 4BS; tel. 01179 042825; e-mail: general@nfm.org.uk; www.nfm.u-net.com.
- Parentline offers help and advice to parents on bringing up children and teenagers. Helpline 0800 800 2222; textphone 0800 783 6783; www.parentlineplus.org.uk.
- Relate helps couples with relationship difficulties. Herbert Gray College, Littlechurch Street, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 3AP; tel: 01788 573241; e-mail: enquiries@relate.org.uk; www.relate.org.uk.
- The YoungMinds Parents' Information Service provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; www.youngminds.org.uk. YoungMinds produce a booklet for parents: *Keeping in Touch: How to Help your Child after Separation and Divorce*.
- **Or check out this website designed for children:** www.itsnotyourfault.org.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

- Reassure them that they will still be loved and cared for by both parents.
- Make time to spend with your child.
- Be reliable about arrangements to see your child.
- Show that you are interested in your child's views, but make it clear that parents are responsible for the decisions.
- Carry on with the usual activities and routines, like seeing friends and members of the extended family.
- Make as few changes as possible. This will help your child feel that, in spite of the difficulties, loved ones still care about them and that life can be reasonably normal.

If you are finding it difficult to help your child cope, you may want to seek outside help. Your general practitioner will be able to offer support and advice. Some children may need specialist

help from the local child and adolescent mental health service. Usually parents are the ones who need help in sorting out their differences, so that they can fully support the child.

References

- Burrett, J. (1993) *To and Fro Children: Guide to Successful Parenting after Divorce*. London: Thorson.
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- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.
- Wells, R. (2003) *Helping Children Cope with Divorce (Overcoming Common Problems)*. London: Sheldon.